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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000415

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SUBJECT: VIOLENCE IN BAGHDAD'S AMEL NEIGHBORHOOD: SUNNI AND
SHIA PERSPECTIVES

Classified By: POLCOUNS MARGARET SCOBAY FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Sunni residents of the Baghdad area of al Amel told EmbOffs that Sunnis in their neighborhood continued be tortured, killed and forcibly displaced by Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia members. They claimed that the operations had been so severe that the neighborhood had lost most of its Sunni residents. In contrast, conversations with Shia residents of the same neighborhood complained about terrorist torture and killings against Shia residents in al Amel, claiming that some attacks originated from local Sunni mosques. The Shia contacts acknowledged that displacement was a problem, but turned their attention to the hundreds of Shia who had come into the neighborhood because they were forced out from other predominantly Sunni neighborhoods. End Summary.

A LITTLE ABOUT AL AMEL

12. (C) Al Amel, located in South-Central Baghdad in the Rasheed district is considered by some to be a working class, lower-income area, bordering Sunni-dominant neighborhoods such Jihad and Yarmouk. Local Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) members estimate the population to be approximately 175,000. Terrorist or JAM attacks in al Amel are reported in the local media on a weekly basis, if not daily. Amel is an example of a story that has become common in Baghdad over the past year -- a previously mixed neighborhood that has suffered intensified violence and displacement following the February 22, 2006 attack on the Askariyah shrine.

SUNNIS SEE JAM VIOLENCE, FORCED DISLOCATION

13. (C) Emboffs spoke February 1 with three Sunni Arab residents of al Amel at a meeting arranged by a regular political contact. The three -- a professor and two mid-level government workers -- said they were average citizens who had become deeply alarmed and concerned about increased polarization and forced displacements in their neighborhood. One actually used the term "ethnic cleansing" when describing the situation in al Amel. The three residents pointed to the establishment of a branch of the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) in al Amel this past spring as a turning point. The branch office had rapidly begun to recruit local Shia residents to join the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia and compiled a list of Sunni tribal sheikhs and other Sunni notables in the area, ostensibly to target them. One of the Sunni interlocutors claimed that thereafter, JAM had systematically targeted certain pockets of

the Amel area, starting with sections with only a small number of Sunni residents and then moving to sections with higher Sunni concentrations. They said that Sunni residents were either attacked or kidnapped and taken to a former power plant compound to be tortured and killed. The Sunni professor claimed he knew this because of his continued association with long-time Shia residents, who continued to covertly protect some of their Sunni neighbors. He had also heard this report from other Sunnis living in the area. The three claimed that the violence had led Sunni residents to leave the area, such that al Amel -- which was previously evenly split between Sunni and Shia residents -- was now only ten percent Sunni.

SHIA CONCERNED ABOUT SUNNI TERRORISM

14. (C) Separate conversations with Shia residents of al Amel portrayed a different picture. During a December 3, 2006 conversation with Emboffs, Shia residents -- including Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) members complained that that the neighborhood was being torn apart by Sunni-sponsored terrorism and insurgent activity. These Shia contacts claimed that that Sunni terrorist groups were using local Sunni mosques as headquarters for their operations, including the the Ahra Mubashrrah mosque (mahallah 809). They said that the mosque had become a bastion for sniper activity, torture of Shia residents, and planning operations. They described various events which they linked to the insurgents, including the killing and beheading of a young Shia boy over the summer, and numerous bomb attacks on residents' activities, including a

BAGHDAD 00000415 002 OF 002

children's soccer game.

15. (C) The council members brushed aside any mention of JAM, admitting that there was indeed an OMS office for the area, but declining to elaborate on JAM activities. One Shia NAC member instead complained about several reconciliation attempts he had tried to organize between Sunni/Shia residents, which he said inevitably would be targeted by terrorists. When asked about displacement, the NAC member noted that the biggest displacement issue that al Amel was facing was the influx of Shia residents who were being forced out of their homes from other areas of Baghdad such as Saydia, Jihad, and Khadra. He said that the NAC had registered over 700 incoming displaced families since February.

COMMENT

16. (C) In many conversations we have had with Baghdad inhabitants, we have found that Sunni residents - almost universally - focus on JAM violence (sometimes in collusion with Iraqi Security Forces) while Shia residents focus on Sunni terrorist/insurgent attacks. Despite these almost formulaic one-sided perspectives, which to some may indicate an irreconcilable schism, there are signs of hope. For example, one Sunni resident was clear in pointing out that long-time neighbors, whether Shia or Sunni, still maintained strong, albeit covert bonds. He said that they were not willing to turn their backs on their Sunni neighbors, many times discretely warning neighbors when they knew a JAM attack to be coming -- though by doing so they were putting themselves at risk. He asserted that the only way to stop JAM was to get rid of the leadership, saying that otherwise there was no other way to entice JAM members away from the organization. Many were too "afraid" to leave the organization for fear of being killed because of the secrets they carried about JAM. Alternatively, it is clear based on conversations with other Baghdad

residents that many Shia view the JAM as a viable means of protection against terrorist attacks.
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